



EDITORIAL

OUR VIEWS

Honour veterans to life's end

Canadian war veterans will be riding the buses free of charge in Ottawa this week and feted at lunches and numerous special events across the country leading up to Remembrance Day on Sunday. The honours are fitting for those who have done service and made sacrifices for their country.

But one week does not make up for the rest of the year. The best way to honour veterans is to ensure they are treated with respect all the time — not just at this time of year, but throughout their lives and especially at the end of their lives.

It is perplexing that the federal government — which has focused so much attention on respect and remembrance of Canadian history — is failing to help the most vulnerable veterans and their families retain some dignity at their end of their lives.

The federal government must do a better job on this crucial file. And it should act quickly. Having veterans advocates and the Royal Canadian Legion pleading for more money so that the families of poor veterans can afford decent burials undermines good work the federal government has done to improve veterans' benefits and makes the message of respect for veterans in the days leading up to Remembrance Day look like lip service.

Recently, the Ottawa Citizen reported that Canadian funeral directors are covering the bulk of the costs of funerals for the country's most impoverished veterans because a federal fund to pay for those funerals is wildly inadequate. The Funeral Service Association of Canada said

The Legion has made a plea to the federal government to increase the allowance to pay for veterans' funerals. "The fact that Canadian funeral directors are obliged to cover the costs of funerals for Canada's most impoverished War Veterans bears witness to the lack of recognition for the immeasurable debt of gratitude Canadians owe all Veterans," said Gordon Moore, who is Dominion president of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Not only is the support for veterans' funerals inadequate, but there is a compelling argument that many families who need it are not getting it. Recently released numbers indicate that more than two-thirds of applicants to the burial fund are turned down because they either did not meet eligibility requirements or failed the means test. Only veterans who fought in the world wars or the Korean War or receive veterans disability benefits are eligible for the burial fund. Those who served in Afghanistan or during the Cold War are not eligible.

Upgrading the benefit would cost the federal government between \$5 million and \$7 million a year, it is estimated. Although it is important for the federal government to reduce costs and keep budgets under control, this is a relatively small amount that can make a cry-

The federal government pays for funerals for impoverished veterans under a program administered by the Last Post Fund, which was formed in 1909 after a Montreal orderly helped a man brought in by police who they described as a drunk. The man was no drunk but a veteran of the Boer War who was homeless and suffering from hypothermia and malnutrition and soon died. The orderly, Arthur Hair, was "utterly shocked by the Empire's disregard for its Veteran," according to the Last Post Fund's website. He began to raise money to provide a dignified burial for the soldier. The organization has helped bury 150,000 veterans since then and in 1998 became the sole administrator of the Veterans Affairs Funeral and Burial program.

The federal government provides about \$3,600 to pay for funerals for the poorest veterans, determined through a means test. But funeral directors and officials with the Legion say the benefit does not begin to cover the cost of a funeral. Funeral home operators commonly pay the balance. Nor is it anywhere near the amount provided to members of the Canadian Forces or the RCMP, which is \$12,700.

It casts a shadow over efforts to honour veterans this week and the country's renewed focus on history headed to Canada's 150th anniversary if we can't give poor veterans a dignified final farewell.

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